

Continuum:
The Australian Journal of Media & Culture
vol. 5 no 2 (1990)

Film: Matters of Style

Edited by Adrian

'Satyajit Ray (1921-1992)'

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On Friday 29 and Sunday 31 May 1992 the Film and Television Institute of Western Australia paid homage to the Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray by screening two of his films: *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman*, 1975) and *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*, 1958). The following texts introduced the screenings.

I. Down Memory Lane

We have gathered here to pay homage to a great filmmaker, certainly the greatest Indian filmmaker and arguably among the dozen or so masters of cinema in the world. I recall seeing my first Satyajit Ray film, *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Little Road*), during the heady years of the mid-1960s, after Ravi Shankar had made his grand impact on the world of music and the Beatles had introduced a sitar coda to one of the songs on their album *Rubber Soul* called "Norwegian Wood". The year was most probably 1965 as I do recall going to a Ravi Shankar concert that year - and my copy of the Shankar album *Portrait of a Genius* has 1965 written on the dust cover. I was a second year history student in Wellington, New Zealand then. I remember the small theatre in Willis Street at the bottom of the sharp precipice that divided the University's residential college, Weir House, from the city. *Pather Panchali* was being shown as a one-off screening on, I think, a Friday evening. This was a theatre with decidedly European tastes because many of the films of the continental filmmakers including Polanski's *Knife in the Water* were shown there. I also recall the company in which I saw Ray: a third year Indian History student whose essays were our envy; an economic historian who was my college partner in the New Zealand version of the card game called 500; and my close friend Boyd Anderson, a brilliant mathematician and logician, whose life was cut short by the demands placed upon him by genius. It was their first Indian film and I was worried that, like my earlier attempt at introducing Kiwis to things Indian through an exemplary (or so I thought at that stage) Indian film *Ganga Jumna*, this too was going to be a disaster. Indian art cinema of the popular variety, with the exception of rare gems like P.C. Barua's *Devdas* (1935), had a tendency to somehow collapse artistically because the centre was missing. Somehow the purity of design could not be maintained. I recalled all those films that I had seen in my childhood in Empire Theatre - *Do Bigha Zameen*, *Awara*, *Mahal*, *Baiju Bawra*, *Madhumati*, *Sujata*, *Sadhna* - in all of which generic unity was invariably sacrificed so as to make way for the sentimental and the musical. It was much later in life that I could theorise the Indian popular and see a much more dynamic structure at work behind these films. But that is another narrative, part of another autobiographical fragment. So even though I was not totally ignorant of *Pather Panchali* and had read Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee's novel, I was just a bit nervous and, more to the point, slightly self-conscious.

For the moment my suspicions were being confirmed. I cringed at the thought of facing my friends afterwards. I found the first half hour of the film exceedingly slow, and began to understand why Truffaut walked out of the cinema during the screening of *Pather Panchali* at Cannes in 1956. I became fidgety in my seat, nervously conscious that my colleagues were looking at me accusingly. Fortunately, since there wasn't going to be an interval, I consoled myself by the fact that at least there wouldn't be the need to justify the film over a cup of tea in the foyer. But then something

happened. I can't recall the precise nature of the filmic image, or whether it was a narrative fragment (it was certainly not the death of Durga), or whether it was Ravi Shankar's *raga* capturing the rainy season or *Raga Todi* being played on the flute. Though memory is vague now, I do believe it was the offer of a guava by Durga to old Indir Thakrun, the aunt who had come to Harihar Ray and his wife Sarbajaya's house to die. Subsequent viewing of the film now reinforces that memory. It is a touching image, but not done with the kind of sentimentality or excessive purging of emotion I had come to associate with popular Indian cinema. Here the camera was simply observing an offer and a response, like a ritualistic act. The image, momentarily frozen, redeemed for me the film. It was a point of contact with the possibilities entertained in some of the Indian films I had seen, and here for once a new kind of realism, the neo-realism of the Italian masters, was being used for Indian effects. I had seen this in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, but the impact, because of my own cultural upbringing, was much more immediate. It was like my first encounter with Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where it wasn't until the epiphanic scene on the beach, as Stephen Dedalus watches the girl without any form of desire, except to participate in the aesthetic relish of the vision, that I could get into the text. The rest of the film was a glorious experience, tinged with not inconsiderable pride because I knew that the film was going to be so well received by my friends. And so I watched as the gradual flow of Indian village life moved with the ageless serenity of the Ganges and the music of Ravi Shanker. The tragic was tempered by and rechannelled into the law of *karma*, the Hindu narrative par excellence, as little inconsequential events defined the essence of life. When the film finally came to an end, there was total silence in the theatre. Few immediate questions were asked as we walked up the tortuous Wellington steps towards Terrace Road, Kelburn Parade and Weir House. I knew that here was a film as good as any I had seen; one to be placed alongside *Citizen Kane*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Bicycle Thieves* and *The Seven Samurai*. Then, as if in empathy, Boyd Anderson broke the silence. He said, "It is Ray's capacity to wring such intense emotion from the audience without spilling that emotion into excess - there is no catharsis here, simply the intellect coming to terms with feeling". It was many years later, after I had done my Eng. Lit. bit and began to learn Sanskrit that I realised that this was the aesthetic relish of *karuna*, the Sanskrit *rasa* of pity and compassion, of pain and suffering. Our grand poetic had given us a perfect reception aesthetic. All we needed was its representation in art. Subsequently I saw many of Ray's films, but Boyd Anderson's astute observation has always been there. Boyd died because his sublime imagination could not make life liveable; Satyajit Ray triumphed because he transformed the unliveable into art. For me that was a confirmation of a continuity I had been searching for so long.

II Ray in Context

One of the things that has struck me most about Ray's early films in particular is the degree to which the films grow out of Bengal's contact with English institutions and culture. As the commercial centre for the Indian activities of the East India Company, Calcutta became the conduit through which Western cultural values made their way into India. And the Bengalis were the first to benefit from that contact. But Bengal also had a greater freedom. Unfettered by the strong artistic traditions one finds in other parts of India - the devotional tradition of the North, the epic traditions of Rajasthan, the folk art of Gujarat, the drama of Maharashtra, the dance forms of the Tamil south or the Persian *mathnavis* of Muslim India - Bengal responded to the literary and philosophical traditions of the West with enthusiasm. So much so that it could be correctly said that the beginning of the great literature of Bengal in the nineteenth century coincides with this moment of contact, and has continued ever since. Where other parts of India, until very recently, could look back at their historical past, Bengal has always looked at the immediate present. It is only now with a new generation of postcolonial writing spearheaded by the diasporic novels of V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie that the domination of Bengal is probably coming to an end.

Satyajit Ray's own use of Western narrative forms - and certainly his ironic vision - grows out of this total Bengali cultural context. It resonates with the ways in which the coloniser had interacted with the colonised and left its impact behind. For this reason, many of his great works exploit the condition of the Indian in the context of a colonial world whose values invariably invade the text from the margins of his cinema. *The Apu Trilogy*, *Charulata*, *Devi*, *Jalsaghar* all work out the Bengali intellectual's tussle with essentially imperialist renditions of our history and the new forms of knowledge brought by the West. Satyajit Ray's narratives are therefore symptomatic of the Indian absorption in the narratives of the Empire (especially in so far as the ironic mode of the European bourgeois novel frames his texts). Again, coming from Bengal, that absorption has more recently given way to a subaltern historicity that now finds in Ritwick Ghatak, Kumar Shahani, Shyam Benegal, Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt its cinematic points of departure. Bengal gets dragged into a kind of Indian postmodernism.

Ray's achievement was therefore a consequence of that moment of cosmopolitanism in our lives when we adopted and adapted Western forms and values, when we saw the ways in which the generic capacities of Western narratives may be utilised for the representation of the real lives of Indians themselves. Lacking in the reality principle, all our earlier narratives had been dominated by the epic, mythic, devotional, pastoral forms and our dominant *histoire* was invariably the anecdotal. The bourgeois novel changed all that and film generally was a powerful mediator between the two traditions. In *Jana Aranya*, Ray uses the ironic mode to read a city, Calcutta, so rich in contradictions at every level. The title in Sanskrit (since to trace words back to Sanskrit roots, as one of the characters in the film says, means lifting the lid on our own cultural unconscious) is literally "the people of the wilderness" or "the people in a strange land". The English translation as *The Middleman* takes up one of the key metaphors of the film, *dalal* or the go between, an agent, a broker. But its more common usage in Bengali, as in Hindi, has the meaning of a pimp, a tout, a procurer. Ray plays with these two meanings of the word and at one point makes Somnath's brother suggest that the word must be part of our inner beings because it is Sanskrit in origin. This morning I went through the *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch* of Bächtlingk and Roth (the great German-Sanskrit dictionary) in search of the word *dalal* in Sanskrit but could not find it. The closest I came to was the root *dal* which means to crack, to fly open, to split and the noun *dala* which may be used to describe unclean gold. I wouldn't be surprised if its origin is either Prakrt or even Arabic or Old Iranian. But this is Ray at his best, as he ambiguates and ironically undercuts the humour of Somnath's brother's exercise in comparative philology, and probably even contrasts etymology and social usage: it is after all social behaviour rather than a dictionary that establishes cultural meaning.

We find the same subtle gesture in the Marxist slogans that get crossed out mysteriously when we next see Somnath Bannerji walking beside the walls on which they were written. The symbolic mode intimates the historical period of *The Middleman* - 1975 - when Indira Gandhi declared an Emergency and suspended the Indian constitution, thereby effectively outlawing any form of dissent. And again in the deliberately tempered, slow final images of the film, both the father's and the sister-in-law's responses leave room for a multiplicity of readings: the father's relief is tinged with pain since the old work ethic of the Hindu is now gone; the sister-in-law recognises the full semantic range of *dalal* or *dalalipan*, the action of being a *dalal*. As for Somnath himself, Sukumar's sister Kamla/Jhutika becomes the means of his own success. This is a *karma* locked into notions of guilt and moral sanction about which our great texts, including the *Bhagavad Gita*, had remained silent.

The Music Room is not *The Middleman*, though here too another economic order is finally triumphant. The old feudal order of the zamindar Biswambar Roy disappears and is overtaken by the new capitalist-industrialist class of the money-lender Ganguli. I do not wish to pre-empt your reading except to say that it is my favourite Ray film. It has something of a cult following among Indians, especially non-Bengali Indians, because of the distinctly Lucknowi *thumris* and dances that Ray uses. And, of course, as so often before, there is the magnificent music, this time composed by Ustad Vilayat Khan. I trust this is not an improper film with which to complete our homage to a great filmmaker whom my own predecessor V.S. Naipaul has called one of the great masters of world cinema.